

Enlightenment

A STUDENT HAD THE FOLLOWING exchange with Zen Master Seung Sahn:

“What is enlightenment?”

“Enlightenment is only a name,” he replied. “If you make ‘enlightenment,’ then enlightenment exists. But if enlightenment exists, then ignorance exists, too. And that already makes an opposites-world. Good and bad, right and wrong, enlightened and ignorant—all of these are opposites. All opposites are just your own thinking. But truth is absolute, and is *before* any thinking or opposites appear. So if you make something, you will get something, and that something will be a hindrance. But if you don’t make anything, you will get everything, OK?”

The student continued, “But is enlightenment really just a name? Doesn’t a Zen master have to attain the experience of enlightenment in order to become a Zen master?”

“The *Heart Sutra* says that there is ‘no attainment, with nothing to attain.’ If enlightenment is attained, it is not true enlightenment. Having enlightenment is already a big mistake.”

“Then is everyone already enlightened?”

Dae Soen Sa Nim¹ laughed and said, “Do you understand ‘no attainment’?”

“No.”

“‘No attainment’ is true attainment. So I already told you about the *Heart Sutra*. It says, ‘There is no attainment, with nothing to attain.’ You must *attain* ‘no attainment.’”

The student rubbed his head. “I think I understand ...”

“You understand? So I ask you, what is attainment? What is there to attain?”

“Emptiness,” the man replied.

“Emptiness?” Dae Soen Sa Nim asked. “But in true emptiness, there is no name and no form. So there is also no attainment. Even opening your mouth to express it, you are already mistaken. If you say, ‘I have attained true emptiness,’ you are wrong.”

“Hmmm,” the student said. “I’m beginning to understand. At least I think I am.”

“The universe is always true emptiness, OK? Now you are living in a dream. Wake up! Then you will soon understand.”

“How can I wake up?”

“I hit you!” (Laughter from the audience.) “Very easy, yah?”

The student was silent for a few moments, while Dae Soen Sa Nim eyed him intently. “I still don’t get it. Would you please explain a bit more?”

“OK. Can you see your eyes?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Oh? How?”

“By looking in a mirror.”

“That’s not your eyes! That is only a reflection of your eyes. So your eyes cannot see your eyes. If you try to see your eyes, it’s already a big mistake. Talking about enlightenment is also like that. It’s like your eyes trying to see your eyes.”

“But my question is, when you were a young monk, you had the actual *experience* of enlightenment. What was this experience?”

“I hit you! Ha ha ha ha!”

The student was silent.

“OK, one more try. Suppose we have before us some honey, some sugar, and a banana. All of them are sweet. Can you explain the difference between honey’s sweetness, sugar’s sweetness, and banana’s sweetness?”

“Hmmm ...”

“But each has a different sweetness, yah? How can you explain it to me?”

The student looked suddenly even more perplexed. “I don’t know ...”

The Zen master continued, “Well, you could say to me, ‘Open your mouth. *This* is honey, *this* is sugar, and *this* is banana!’ Ha ha ha ha! So if you want to understand enlightenment, it’s already making something. Don’t make anything. Moment to moment, just *do* it. That’s already enlightenment. So, first understand your true self. To understand your true self, you must understand the meaning of my hitting you. I have already put enlightenment into your mind. Ha ha ha ha! (Extended laughter from the audience)

1. *Dae Soen Sa Nim*, meaning “Great Honored Zen Master,” is the title by which Zen Master Seung Sahn’s students refer to him in the West.